

Students' Educational Preferences and Occupational Aspirations: A Study in a Multi-Ethnic Society

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Introduction

Tertiary education is an important aspect of our modern lifestyle and it plays an important role in the process of making occupational choices (Butler, 1968). According to Powlett and Young (1996), transition from school to work is an important period in adolescence and young adulthood because during this period, seeming irrevocable decisions have to be made by the individuals. These decisions usually have long-term implication on one's life.

In Malaysia, the people and the government both place much importance to higher education as it is seen as an important means of social mobility and economic advancement (Lim, 1993 cited in Pope, et al., 2002). This paper describes educational preferences and occupational aspirations of students from late secondary school (form five⁵⁶) to end of undergraduate education focusing on how ethnicity influences their educational preferences and occupational aspirations.

After form five, students have the option of either continuing their education or seeking for employment. Those who wish to continue their education can either enrol in a pre-university programme such as matriculation or *Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia* (STPM) or enrol in various programmes in colleges or polytechnics. STPM is equivalent to A' Levels. Matriculation programmes are one or two year programmes to meet the requirement for the entry into local, public universities. STPM on the other hand is a two-year programme which is conducted in selected schools and colleges and can be used to meet the entry requirement into local, public universities (Ministry of Education, 2002).

⁵⁶ At the end of form five, students sit for a general examination known as *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), which is equivalent to the GCE O' Levels.

Occupational aspirations and educational preferences have often been the focus of researchers from various fields of study⁵⁷ (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence, 1993; Pavalko and Bishop, 1996). Many researchers have identified family background as an important influence on educational preferences and occupational aspirations (see Blau and Duncan, 1957; Empey, 1956; Haller, et al., 1974; Sewell and Shah, 1968; Sewell, Haller and Straus, 1957; Schwarzweller and Lyson, 1974). In addition to this, students' academic performance is also often related to their educational preferences and occupational aspirations (Otto and Haller, 1979; Sewell, Haller and Straus, 1957; Wilson and Portes, 1975; Werts, 1967). One major criticism of studies in this field is that the samples used in many studies were made up of white males and excluded minority groups. In recent years, there have been more studies which highlight the differences between various ethnic groups (Patton and McMahon, 1999). Qian and Blair (1999) showed that there is a difference in the variables which influences educational aspirations of student from different ethnic groups. Dillard and Campbell (1981) that the relationship between Black adolescent are very different from those of Puerto Rican and Anglo adolescent. Seyfrit et al. (1998) in a study in Alaska concluded that the effect of ethnicity are rather indirect and can be explained in terms of variables related to one's family.

Data and Methods

The data for this study were collected in 2001 using questionnaires from groups of students at three educational stages. The students were randomly selected using multi stage cluster sampling. The first sample consists of form five students from the states of Penang and Kedah⁵⁸. For this group of students, 560 questionnaires were distributed. The response rate was 95 per cent giving a sample of 533 students. The second sample consists of first year undergraduate students from Universiti Sains Malaysia. A total of 541 questionnaires were distributed and 503 questionnaires were returned (response rate of 93 per cent). The third sample consists of final year undergraduate

⁵⁷ Different researchers, however use different terms to refer to these two concepts. Many studies on educational preferences, for example, use terms such as educational aspirations and educational plan (Pavalko and Bishop, 1996). Similarly, studies on occupational aspiration use terms such as occupational choice, occupational preference and career choice (see Herr, 1982; Isaacson and Brown, 1997; Kelly, 1989).

⁵⁸ Penang and Kedah are two states in the northern region of Malaysia.

students from Universiti Sains Malaysia. Here, 533 questionnaires were distributed and 500 questionnaires were returned (response rate of 94 per cent).

These questionnaires were used to collect data regarding students' individual, family characteristics and details regarding students' educational preferences and occupational aspirations. Individual characteristics include variables such as *Gender* (male or female) and *Ethnicity*. *Ethnicity* consists of two major categories which are Bumiputra (which consists of Malays and natives from Sabah and Sarawak)⁵⁹ and non-Bumiputra (which consists of Chinese, Indians and other ethnic groups). *Academic Performance*, for form five students, is a score based on their previous examination in school. For first year and final year students, *Academic Performance* is a score based on the results used for entry to the university. Family characteristics include variables such as father's education, mother's education, father's occupation, mother's occupation, and family income. These variables were used to create a score for family socio economic status (*SES*)

Educational Preferences refers to the bachelors' degree programme which the students were planning to pursue. *Educational Choices*, for first year and final year students refer to degree programmes the students were enrolled in⁶⁰. *Educational Preferences* and *Educational Choices* consist of nominal categories of educational programmes preferred or chosen by the students. These categories have been coded into numeric values based on the requirement of entry for each programme. As the actual value used as entry requirement is confidential, each programme is given a score based on the actual value. In this study, a particular programme is considered as having higher prestige/more prestigious based on these entry requirements. For example, a programme that requires higher entry requirement is considered as having higher prestige, and vice versa. *Occupational*

⁵⁹ Sabah and Sarawak are states in East Malaysia.

⁶⁰ In Malaysia, while applying for a place in a public university, students are required to state five preferred degree programmes (according to the order of preference) in the application form. Even though most students are offered a programme which is listed as one of their preferences, the *Unit Pusat Universiti* (central body responsible for the enrollment of students for bachelors' degree programme in all the public universities in Malaysia) might offer student a programme which they did not state as one of their preferences.

Aspirations refers to the occupation which the students were planning to pursue after completing their degree programme. The nominal categories of occupations were later given a score based on the findings of a separate survey by the researcher. In this survey, the respondents ranked twelve occupations (which were the occupations aspired to by the three groups of students). Each occupation was then given a score based on the ranking of all the respondents⁶¹.

Findings

Three types of analysis were done using the data collected in this study: frequency distribution, cross tabulation and multiple regression. For form five students, 53 per cent are female and 47 per cent are male students. This sample also consists of 60 per cent Bumiputra and 40 per cent non-Bumiputra students. For first year students, 62 per cent students are female and 38 per cent are male. Fifty six per cent of first year students are Bumiputra and 44 per cent are non-Bumiputra. Sixty six per cent of final year students are female while 34 per cent are male. Fifty seven per cent of final year students are Bumiputra and 43 per cent are non-Bumiputra.

The form five students preferred nine major programmes while the first year and final year students preferred 11 different programmes. In addition to this, the students aspired to twelve different occupations (see Tables 3 to 8 in the appendix). All other educational programmes or occupations have been recoded as 'Others' due to very small frequency in each category. The values shown in Table 3 to 8 are column percentages. Cramer's V values between *Educational Preferences*; *Occupational Aspirations* and *Ethnicity* are shown at the bottom of the tables. The Cramer's V value between *Educational Preferences* and *Ethnicity* are 0.25 ($p < 0.01$), 0.27 ($p < 0.01$) and 0.31 ($p < 0.001$) for form five, first year and final year students, respectively. In addition to this, the Cramer's V values between *Educational Choices* of first year and final year students with *Ethnicity* are 0.40 ($p < 0.001$) and 0.14*, respectively. The Cramer's V value between *Occupational Aspirations* and *Ethnicity* are 0.38 ($p < 0.001$), 0.23

⁶¹ This was done because at the time of data collection and data analysis of this study no prestige score of occupations in Malaysia were available to the researcher. The researcher is unable to discuss in detail how the scores were obtained in this paper due to space constraint.

* The value was not significant at 0.05 level.

($p < 0.01$) and 0.22 ($p < 0.01$) for form five, first year and final year students, respectively. These values generally show weak association between the two variables. However, a more detailed analysis of the contingency tables shows some differences in the educational preferences and occupational aspirations of the students from the two ethnic groups.

Among the form five students, the Bumiputras, have higher preference for accountancy, management, education and law. The non-Bumiputra form five students have higher preference for engineering, medicine, social science and computer science. First year non-Bumiputra students are more likely to prefer pharmacy, science and computer science when compared to Bumiputra students who are more likely to prefer accountancy, education, arts and social science. The comparison between Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra final year students shows that, Bumiputra students are more likely to prefer medicine and pharmacy while non-Bumiputra students are more likely to prefer science, accountancy and management. Other than these programmes, Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra students have almost equal preferences.

Comparing the *Occupational Aspirations* of form five students it is clear that, there are some major differences between the two ethnic groups. Bumiputra students are more likely to aspire to be accountants, teachers, and civil servants. The non-Bumiputra students are more likely to aspire to become doctors, engineers, IT professionals and architects. First year Non-Bumiputra students are more likely to aspire to be pharmacists, engineers, IT professionals and managers while higher percentages of Bumiputra students aspire to be teachers and civil servants. As for the final year students, higher percentages of non-Bumiputra students aspire to become engineers, accountants, business persons, and managers while the Bumiputra students are more likely to aspire to become pharmacists, lecturers and civil servants. It is interesting to note that in all three educational stages becoming an engineer is highly preferred by non-Bumiputra students while becoming a civil servant is highly preferred by Bumiputra students.

In addition to this, the researcher also looked for differences between Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra students who are doing specialised

courses such as engineering, pharmacy and computer science, and compared their occupational aspirations. When we compare the first year Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra students, the percentage of a student enrolled in a particular programme aspiring to the occupation specifically related to the programme is almost similar. For example, almost all the first year Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra students enrolled in pharmacy, engineering and computer science aspire to become pharmacists and IT professionals and engineers, respectively. However, a rather different trend is seen among final year students. For example, 84 per cent, 73 per cent and 43 per cent of Bumiputra students enrolled in pharmacy, computer science and engineering programme aspire to become pharmacists, IT professional and engineers, respectively. On the other hand, 63 per cent, 77 per cent and 74 per cent of non-Bumiputra students enrolled in pharmacy, computer science and engineering aspire to become pharmacists, IT professional and engineers, respectively. The most obvious difference is in engineering. Thirty three per cent of Bumiputra engineering students aspire to become lecturers while another 14 per cent of students aspire to become teachers.

The overall findings of this study show that family SES and students' *Academic Performance* are important variables which influence students' *Educational Preferences* and *Occupational Aspirations* at all three educational stages. Multiple regression models 1 to 8⁶² shown in Tables 1 and 2 gives an insight on how variables related on students' family (such as SES) and variables related to the individual characteristics (such as *Academic Performance* and *Gender*) influence students from different ethnic groups. Models 1 to 4 do not show much difference between *Educational Preferences* and *Occupational Aspirations* among Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra first year students.

⁶² Multiple regression models for form five students' *Educational Preferences* and *Occupational Aspirations* were not included in this paper because all the models gave a value of R^2 less than 0.05 when compared across *Ethnicity*.

Table 1: Multiple Regression Models for Educational Choices and Occupational Aspirations of first year students

Independent variables	Educational Choices				Occupational Aspirations			
	Model 1: Bumiputra		Model 2: Non-Bumiputra		Model 3: Bumiputra		Model 4: Non-Bumiputra	
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	β
Constant	-6.15***		-3.45**		-0.39		-1.01	
Academic performance	0.13***	0.49	0.09***	0.35	0.09***	0.53	0.10***	0.65
SES	0.21***	0.25	0.31***	0.28	0.14***	0.27	0.11*	0.16
R ²	0.42		0.31		0.49		0.56	
*p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001								

Models 4 to 8 shows that there are some differences among Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra final year students. There is some influence of *Gender* on non-Bumiputra students' *Educational Preferences* and *Occupational Aspirations* when compared to Bumiputra students. Female non-Bumiputra students have lower *Educational Preferences* and *Occupational Aspirations* when compared to male non-Bumiputra students. This trend is not seen among Bumiputra students among the first year students.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Models for Educational Choices and Occupational Aspirations of final year students

Independent variables	Educational Choices				Occupational Aspirations			
	Model 5: Bumiputra		Model 6: Non-Bumiputra		Model 7: Bumiputra		Model 8: Non-Bumiputra	
	<i>B</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>β</i>
Constant	-5.521***		-1.15		0.39		1.16	
Academic performance	0.143***	0.46	0.11***	0.36	0.07***	0.52	0.07***	0.54
SES	n.r.	n.r	n.r.	n.r	0.15***	0.27	0.14**	0.20
Gender 0=male; 1= female)	n.r.	n.r	-1.59***	-0.24	n.r.	n.r	-0.51**	-0.18
R ²	0.21		0.23		0.40		0.47	
*p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001								

n.r. shows that the particular variable was not included in the model.

The analysis done in this study shows that ethnicity influences students' educational preferences and occupational aspirations in two ways. First of all, the influence of ethnicity can be seen in the preference towards particular educational programme and aspirations towards particular occupation. For example, Bumiputra students consistently have higher aspirations to become civil servants and non-Bumiputra students consistently have higher aspiration to become

engineers in all three educational stages. Secondly, influence of ethnicity is different among final year students. There is some influence of ethnicity in the gendered selection of educational programme and occupation among final year non-Bumiputra students. The influence of ethnicity can also be seen in the aspiration towards specialised occupations, for example, only 43 per cent of Bumiputra final year students who are enrolled in an engineering programme aspire to become an engineer. This trend is not seen among the first year students or the final year non-Bumiputra students.

Discussion and Conclusion

There have been many researches on the influence of ethnicity on educational preferences and occupations aspirations. However the extent of the influence of ethnicity on educational preferences and occupational aspirations is often seen to be mixed (Mau and Bikos, 2000). This can explain why the influence of ethnicity is not seen consistently in all three educational stages. The nature of data in this study and the small size of ethnic sub sample available in this study limit the researcher from performing more sophisticated analysis to identify how ethnicity plays a role in influence students' educational preferences and occupational aspirations.

It can, however, be hypothesised that in Malaysia's collectivist culture, the role of ethnicity in influencing educational preferences and occupational aspirations would seem to operate in the family system. According to Seyfrit et al. (1998), the effect of ethnicity is often indirect and can be explained in terms of variables related to family. This explains why, in this study, ethnicity only shows some influence while the overall findings shows the strong influence of variables related to family. The cultural values specific to each ethnic group is transferred to their children in the form of parents' expectation which in turn influences their educational preferences, educational choices and occupational aspirations. Leong (1985) suggested that in traditional Chinese culture, an individual's career choice is expected to fulfil the family's expectation. This can also be said to apply to other ethnic groups in Malaysia. The important difference is in the expectation of the family. Different ethnic groups may have different expectation; thus, motivating their children to choose different types of educational programmes and occupations.

The influence of ethnicity on occupational aspirations on final year students can also be influenced by other reality factors. Among the three groups of students, the final year students are the closest into making real occupational choices; therefore their aspirations may be influenced by reality factors such as existing trends in labour market (e.g. sex stereotyping of occupations or certain occupations are dominated by an ethnic group) and labour market demands on certain occupations.

As conclusion, it can be said that, ethnicity has some influence on students' educational preferences and occupational aspirations. The influence is often indirect and works through the influence of family on educational preferences and occupational aspirations. The influence of ethnicity is different at different educational stages.

Limitations of this Study

In the two ethnic groups discussed in this paper, there are a few sub-groups (e.g. non-Bumiputra consists of Chinese, Indians and other ethnic groups). The small size of sample did not allow the researcher to do specific analysis for each of these sub-groups. While these sub-groups may have similarities, each sub-group may have unique characteristics. This sample did not allow the researcher the opportunity to explore these unique characteristics and how these characteristics might influence educational preferences and occupational aspirations. Another limitation of this study is that, it focuses on students who are enrolled in a bachelors' degree programme in a public university in Malaysia. Other types tertiary qualification or institution has been excluded from this study.

Keeping these limitations in mind, the interpretation and generalization of the findings of this study has to be done with caution. This study used a random sample therefore the findings that are statistically significant can be generalised to the populations from which the samples were drawn. However, generalisation beyond these populations can only be done with similar populations and not all groups of adolescents or young adults.

Appendix

Table 3: Educational Preferences by Ethnicity (Form Five Students)

Educational Preferences	Ethnicity (per cent)		Total (per cent)
	Bumiputra	Non-Bumiputra	
Accountancy	21.2	12.8	17.8
Engineering	13.3	23.6	17.5
Medicine	11.5	17.9	14.2
Computer science	11.5	14.9	12.9
Management	13.7	8.2	11.4
Social science	5.8	9.7	7.4
Education	9.4	4.1	7.2
Law	7.6	4.1	6.1
Science	4.3	3.6	4.0
Others	1.8	1.0	1.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

$\chi^2=0.25$, $p<0.01$; $n=473$

Table 4: Educational Preferences by Ethnicity (First Year Students)

Educational Preferences	Ethnicity (per cent)		Total (per cent)
	Bumiputra	Non-Bumiputra	
Medicine	7.8	8.2	8.0
Pharmacy	3.2	11.8	7.0
Engineering	8.2	8.2	8.2
Computer Science	13.2	21.8	17.0
Science	7.1	10.0	8.4
Accountancy	6.0	3.2	4.8
Management	3.2	2.7	3.0
Education	15.3	6.8	11.6
Social Science	17.8	12.3	15.4
Arts	6.8	3.2	5.2
Architecture	8.9	7.7	8.4
Others	2.5	4.1	3.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

$\chi^2=0.27$, $p<0.001$; $n=501$

Table 5: Educational Preferences by Ethnicity (Final Year Students)

Educational Preferences	Ethnicity (per cent)		Total (per cent)
	Bumiputra	Non-Bumiputra	
Medicine	21.4	4.2	14.0
Pharmacy	11.2	7.9	9.8
Engineering	10.2	9.8	10.0
Computer Science	7.7	8.9	8.2
Science	11.2	17.3	13.8
Accountancy	2.8	10.7	6.2
Management	1.4	5.1	3.0
Education	1.4	5.1	3.0
Social Science	11.6	12.6	12.0
Arts	5.6	6.5	6.0
Architecture	4.9	5.1	5.0
Others	1.8	1.9	1.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

$\chi^2=0.31$, $p<0.001$; $n=499$

Table 6: Occupational Aspirations by Ethnicity (Form Five Students)

Occupational Aspirations	Ethnicity (per cent)		Total (per cent)
	Bumiputra	Non-Bumiputra	
Doctor	10.7	17.4	13.3
Engineer	11.4	32.6	19.6
Accountant	19.3	6.0	14.1
Manager	7.2	5.4	6.5
Lawyer	6.2	4.3	5.5
IT professional	6.2	9.8	7.6
Teacher	13.4	6.0	10.5
Architect	3.4	7.6	5.1
Business person	8.6	6.0	7.6
Civil Servant	9.7	1.6	6.5
Others	3.8	3.3	3.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

$V=0.38$, $p<0.001$; $n=474$

Table 7: Occupational Aspirations by Ethnicity (First Year Students)

Occupational Aspirations	Ethnicity (per cent)		Total (per cent)
	Bumiputra	Non-Bumiputra	
Pharmacist	6.1	8.2	7.0
Engineer	11.4	13.3	12.2
IT professional	5.0	13.2	8.6
Accountant	3.9	2.7	3.4
Architect	11.1	11.0	11.0
Teacher	22.5	11.9	17.8
Business Person	9.6	10.5	10.0
Lecturer	9.3	10.0	9.6
Manager	6.1	9.6	7.6
Civil Servant	13.2	6.8	10.4
Others	1.8	2.7	2.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

$V=0.23$, $p<0.01$; $n=499$

Table 8: Occupational Aspirations by Ethnicity (Final Year Students)

Occupational Aspirations	Ethnicity (per cent)		Total (per cent)
	Bumiputra	Non-Bumiputra	
Pharmacist	9.4	4.7	7.4
Engineer	7.3	9.3	8.2
IT professional	6.6	7.9	7.2
Accountant	1.4	3.7	2.4
Architect	7.3	6.1	6.8
Teacher	19.6	17.8	18.8
Business Person	10.1	16.4	12.8
Lecturer	17.1	13.6	15.6
Manager	5.2	9.3	7.0
Civil Servant	12.6	5.6	9.6
Others	3.1	5.6	4.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

$V=0.22$, $p<0.01$; $n=500$

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Premalatha Karupiah: **Students' Educational Preferences and Occupational Aspirations: A Study in a Multi-Ethnic Society**

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Abstract

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